

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 487

FL 019 503

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TITLE Overcoming Difficulties in Testing Oral Competency: A Discussion of Facilitating Factors.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 16p.; For the journal as a whole, see FL 019 498.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education; v1 n1 p55-69 Spr 1988

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Grading; Higher Education; High Schools; *Language Proficiency; Language Skills; *Language Tests; *Oral Language; *Second Language Learning; Small Group Instruction; Student Evaluation; Testing
IDENTIFIERS *Oral Proficiency Testing

ABSTRACT

Because interest in oral proficiency on the part of foreign language educators has persisted on several fronts, the common problems that teachers face in implementing oral testing are discussed, and possible solutions are offered. The problems discussed include the following: (1) how to find the time; (2) how to develop tests; and (3) how to evaluate performance. Suggested solutions include setting up role-playing situations for small groups of students and using a simplified evaluative scale to relieve some of the burden of oral testing. Testing students in groups of two to four at a time greatly reduces the teacher's time and also helps alleviate some of the students' anxiety about testing. Regularly administered tests of speaking skills that relate to materials covered in class, as opposed to standardized tests, and proficiency exams dealing with global ability are useful. Open-ended situations work best for intermediate and advanced level students. A simple grading system is outlined. Contains 11 references. (LB)

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Overcoming Difficulties in Testing Oral Competency: a Discussion of Facilitating Factors

ELAINE M. PHILLIPS

The recent interst in oral proficiency on the part of foreign language educators can be noticed on several fronts. The focus in many classrooms has shifted to include communicative competence as well as linguistic competence. The style, if not the substance, of new textbooks and the large number of proficiency-oriented sessions at professional meetings are also indicators that oral proficiency is an area of high interst among language teachers of the '80s, and rightly so. The ability to function verbally in a second language, to use the language for realistic purposes and in real-life situations is a very valid classroom goal.

To encourage this authentic language in students, oral work must be more than a mere recitation of dialogs or participation in structured drills. By now everyone has heard the joke of the French (or Spanish, or German) student talking about a trip to Europe who concludes "but when I got to France (Spain/Germany) no one knew the other half of the dialog!" Much more emphasis is being placed to day on "real comunication," "Meaningful activity,"-what students can do with the language structures they are studying rather than what they know about the language.

To develop proficiency in a second language, students must practice using language in a natural situation in so far as that is possible-in most cases within the confines of the classroom. Once teachers have become convinced of the ease and the importance of devoting an appropriate amount of time to developing students' oral proficiency through directed classroom activities, they soon realize that, in order to convince students of the importance of oral skills, these skills must be evaluated periodically. Students know that if a skill is important, it will be tested; conversely, if the skill is not tested, teachers are hard pressed to convince students that it is important. In fact, Upshur (1971) believes that teachers do not teach if they do not test. Testing, evaluating, and explaining allow students to make appropriate changes in speech behaviors. These changes are manifestations of learning.

Following is a discussion of three problems many teachers will face in implementing oral testing and an attempt at offering possible solutions to those problems.

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Problems in Oral Testing

Teachers who have realized the necessity for testing speaking skills are often overwhelmed by the apparent difficulty of the problems involved: how to find the time, how to develop tests, how to evaluate performance. High school teachers may have as many as 125 students a day or more, while instructors at the post-secondary level may have upwards of 75 students in a beginning language classes. Where do teachers find the time to administer oral exams to such a large number of students?

If teachers do manage to find the time to administer so many oral exams, the next dilemma they face is selecting the kind of exam to be administered. Several standardized tests, such as the MLA Foreign Language Proficiency Tests, and the Pimsleur Proficiency Tests, though available, are usually indirect tests of speaking ability, and Clark (1975) indicates that the evidence does not support a high level of scoring reliability for standardized speaking tests. Non-speaking tests such as reduced redundancy, cloze procedures, and dictation, though they might correlate highly with speaking ability, do not motivate speaking practice and improvement, and thus have little face validity for most students.

Standard tests often include the following types of tasks: pronunciation, manipulative drills, response to a written or taped question, reading aloud, mimicry, picture description, or monolog. While all the above may be valid tasks for testing certain aspects of linguistic ability, none seem truly appropriate for testing whether or not students are actually proficient in the language. Clark (1972) believes there is no close or readily identifiable relationship between competence in communicating and linguistic ability. The correlation is tenuous at best because linguistic weaknesses can be by-passed through circumlocution; acceptability of forms vary from interlocutor to interlocutor; and the redundancy of "real" language allows for comprehension inspite of linguistic defects. Consequently, a test which emphasizes accuracy over adequacy can not be considered a test of communicative competence.

Clark (1975) finds there is no measurement technique of oral proficiency with more face validity than the oral proficiency interview used by the Foreign Service Institute: the Inter-agency Language Roundtable (ILR) oral interview. The American Council on Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has adapted the ILR rating scale to a level appropriate for educators and has trained language teachers as oral proficiency interviewers in several foreign languages, the most common being French, Spanish, and German.

The percentage of language teachers trained as oral interviewers is quite small, but teachers do not need to be trained oral interviewers to test the oral proficiency of their students. In any case, the time required to administer periodic (two to three per semester) oral interviews to all students would be prohibitive. In addition, the classroom teacher is interested, not only in the general proficiency of the students, but also in their specific ability to communicate about the topics and to accomplish the functions that have been covered in the classroom.

Evaluation of these abilities is the third problem confronting teachers faced with administering oral exams. Many solutions, from the sketchiest to the very detailed, have been offered to solve this problem. Callaway (1980) contends that most evaluators make holistic judgements rather than evaluating separate components of the language sample and says "dividing oral performance into components is superfluous at best and artifactual at worst." Further, students may feel that evaluation of oral performance is too subjective and that feedback is too vague. With such problems confronting language teachers, it is no wonder that so many of them decide to forego the evaluation procedure.

Some Possible Solutions

Setting up role-playing situations for small groups of students and using a simplified evaluative scale may relieve some of the burden of oral testing for teachers. The rest of this paper will elaborate on and explicate this simple suggestion as a means of alleviating the three problems discussed above.

The most obvious solution to easing the time strain on teachers is to test more than one student at a time. By testing students in groups of threes, the time necessary for administering oral exams can be cut by nearly two-thirds. In classes of average size (25 students), teachers can administer exams to students in groups of threes in about one class period. While the teacher is listening to each group, the remaining students are working in pairs or individually on tasks assigned by the teacher. The teacher may also prefer to test on two consecutive days for half of the class period. University teachers have the advantage of using their office hours and other time outside of class for oral exams, and as they seldom last more than a few minutes, students rarely object.

In situations where groups of three students can not be formed, teachers could use groups of four or two students, depending on the situation to be developed. The teacher will never participate and will

want to vary the students in the "odd" groups on successive exams. In this writer's experience, groups of three seem to work best because groups of two tend to reflect more sharply any differences in ability levels, and groups of four seem too crowded and do not allow sufficient time for expression.

For students, one of the greatest advantages of group-testing is that it seems to relieve some of their anxiety and take off some of the pressure inherent in the testing situation. If they are not attending to their nerves, students have more attention to devote to the task at hand. Teachers can de-emphasize the evaluative nature of the situation and lower the students' affective filters even more by having the students sit facing each other in a small circle while the evaluator sits discretely outside the circle and listens to the conversation without contributing. Under these circumstances, the role of impartial observer is best for teachers whose natural inclination is to help students. As Wilkinson (1968) indicates, "A sympathetic interviewer [teacher] might win speech from stones who are in any other situation unspeaking." If students have had a great deal of practice in class doing partner- or small-group work, they will feel much more comfortable with the situation at exam time. It would appear that any steps that can be taken to reduce anxiety will improve students performance. Steinberg and Horwitz' (1986:135) research reported that "subjects undergoing experimental treatment aimed at making them feel anxious and 'on the spot' described visual stimuli less interpretively than did subjects in a relaxed, comfortable environment." Steinberg and Horwitz also comment that, although the research conditions were somewhat artificial, "the situation probably seemed quite credible to the many students who feel the constant pressure of evaluation in the second language classroom."

Many teachers and students fear that in a group testing situation, a less prepared student will bring down the grades of the students who are well prepared. Another concern is that better students will overpower and leave the weaker student out of the conversation altogether. These are possibilities, to be sure, but the probability of this happening can be eliminated by teaching students at the beginning of language study some elementary conversational skills and useful expressions. Bragger and Rice's conversational manual for French students, *Du Tac Au Tac* (1987) offers some excellent suggestions, some examples of which are given below:

Expressions used to react: Vraiment? Incroyable! Je comprends. C'est vrai! Nous sommes d'accord. [Really? Unbelievable! I understand. It's true. We agree.]

Expressions used to stall for time: Euh . . . bon . . . voyons . . . mais . . . donc . . . tu sais. [Umm, well, let's see, but, therefore, you know]

Other examples of expressions are given to aid students in asking for clarification, getting additional information, helping the speaker, getting into the conversation, drawing others into the conversation, and backtracking.

Teachers may compile common words and expressions in each language, though students should not be required to memorize lists but should be allowed to choose the expressions they find helpful. The list of expressions can be expanded as students move from the beginning to the intermediate level. First year students might be taught "Et toi?" [and you?] as an expression useful in eliciting a classmate's opinion while second year students might learn "Qu'est-ce que tu en penses?" [What do you think about it?] The expressions should naturally have been practiced with partners and used by the teacher many times in class. Teaching these simple conversational techniques allows the quicker students to shine at exam time by using the expressions appropriately to facilitate the conversations, thereby helping the weaker students, encouraging them, and including them in the conversation. Thus, group testing benefits teachers by saving them valuable time, reducing students' anxiety, and providing support for both stronger and weaker students.

In deciding on the kind of oral test to use periodically, the teacher will probably not select a standardized test. Regularly administered test of speaking skills will be related to materials covered in class; e.g., vocabulary themes, (places in a town, buildings); functions (asking directions, giving directions); structures (immediate future time). Proficiency exams should deal with global ability, and achievement tests with accuracy and content. Because teachers will probably want to elicit particular subject matter while keeping proficiency as a goal, the proposed oral exam may best be called a pro-achievement test. It will cover specific material (vocabulary, structures) from the chapter or chapters, but the emphasis will be on what students can do with the material (function) rather than what they know about the material (form). Teachers will prepare situation cards in English for the students, similar to those used in the

ACTFL oral proficiency interview but related to the topics covered recently in class. Care must be taken in setting up a situation specifically to elicit certain structures. It is easy to arrange a communicative situation where students need to use the past tense, for example, but difficult to find a situation where students must use demonstrative adjectives. Some structures are better suited to written tests, though teachers may make note of students who use them spontaneously.

More open-ended situations seem to work best for intermediate and advanced level students (at least second-year) because they supply the general framework for the situation without requiring too many details and allow students to fill in creatively. When students understand the grading procedure to be followed (*infra*), they are encouraged to add additional material of their own to the situation. Beginning students may need to be given more details on their situation cards. They tend to monitor so heavily that they often have little attention capacity left over for thinking of what to say. "Discuss some of your weekend plans with your two roommates" may be sufficient instructions for intermediate students but could leave beginners stupefied. Because they tend to rely much more heavily on the situation card, a more appropriate card for this level would include some suggestions about what the plans include, e.g., seeing a movie, studying, etc., while still leaving the student the opportunity to fill in with real plans if desired. Below are sample situations with explanations that could be given to first year and second year students.

First year: "It is your first day at the university and you are about to meet your roommates for the first time. Greet the other students, and during the course of the conversation, as you get to know each other, find out the following information about your new pals: where they are from, what their family is like (sisters?, brothers?), what they plan to study, what their favorite leisure activities are, anything else you want to know."

Before this test, students will have practiced greetings, talking about families, and likes and dislikes. Students are reminded that they should make the conversation as natural as possible—they are not grilling a job applicant, after all—and they should not panic if they forget a word. If, for example, they cannot remember the word for brother, they should know that there are other, indirect ways to get the same information. If students have practiced paraphrase and

alternate questions forms-even at the beginning level-they will feel more comfortable using these techniques during group-testing.

Second year: "You are having dinner with two friends when the conversation turns to funny things that happened in the past. You contribute to the entertainment by telling a story about something humorous that happened to you, a family member, or a friend."

Preceding this group-test, students will have had practice in narrating and using transitional expressions and the past tenses. Students are cautioned to develop their narrative, giving plenty of details and to react naturally as the other students are relating their stories. One seldom waits till the end of a story to show any reaction.

A word of caution is proffered for teachers who are writing their own situation cards. Some situations require that each student's card be slightly different: they will have different information to impart or acquire. It is good to practice the situation in English with a colleague to ensure the situation cards are a good "fit." It is also important to assure that students have had ample opportunity to practice the various language functions required during the group-testing, e.g., giving directions, requesting information, greetings. Students may have practiced similar situations or parts of the situation, but the group-test situation cards are in no way rehearsed or memorized by the students. The evaluative experience is not to test memory but proficiency.

The problem that troubles many teachers is that of finding a suitable evaluation technique. A quick review of the literature will turn up a large variety of oral evaluation forms, but this writer has found the following form to be the simplest and the most adequate for grading purposes:

Grading System

- F - Student fails to appear for exam.
- D - Student fails to complete the task (i.e., does not say enough, cannot be understood, makes a gross cultural error).
- C - Student successfully completes the task as presented.
- B - Student successfully completes the task and stands out either by the correctness of language or by the extra material added to the situation.
- A - Student successfully completes the task and stands out both by the correctness of the language and by the extra material added to

the situation.

Students should be very familiar with the evaluation form before testing begins. The form allows students to receive a C on their oral performance by simply completing the task. Those students who want a higher grade have the incentive to be creative and add additional material to the original situation. The amount of material that can be added will vary, of course, according to the level of the student. Teachers can emphasize that the extra material is in addition to and not instead of the assigned task. Students who do not speak enough or who "misspeak" committing serious cultural blunders may receive a D, but only those who do not contribute at all would receive an F. Though a grade of A requires the addition of original material and accuracy, it is not impossible for students to get an A. In taking the accuracy component into consideration, teachers will want to review the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and remember that in high school and lower-division university classes, students seldom surpass the intermediate range of proficiency (Carroll, 1967). Consequently, "stands out by the correctness of the language" is a relative term and does not mean that the student has made no mistakes. Even students who make hundreds on objective tests will often, and completely unaware, use the present tense to talk about past time.

In addition to the grade notation, teachers may wish to give students more specific feed-back on the various subcategories of their oral performance. Although the elaboration of sub-skills may seem unnecessary to some (in testing proficiency, certain skills can make up for the lack of others), many students are comforted by the written, concretely expressed reaction of their teacher. The writer has found a format (Appendix 1) that is useful in providing information to students about individual performances. Teachers may rate fluency, pronunciation, amount of input, and accuracy on a scale of one to five. The form takes only seconds to complete and in some instances explicates a grade, such as input in the case of a B and accuracy in the case of an A. Beginning and even intermediate students should be assured that marks of one, two, or three are common and appropriate, considering the limited contact hours they have had with the language.

Conclusion

The relationship between teaching and testing and between testing and learning cannot be ignored. Teachers cannot fail to test

elements they consider to be integral parts of the foreign language curriculum. Tests obviously serve to measure students' progress, but it should also be remembered that they serve as powerful motivators as well. Tests of communicative competence in particular indicate to students what they can do in the "real" world and serve as reminders to teachers that preparation for the real world is a primary function of the educator (Savignon, 1983). The proficiency testing format described in this paper emphasizes the interactive nature of communicative competence; its adequacy, and not its accuracy. Perhaps the suggested solutions to some of the most compelling problems associated with oral testing will encourage more teachers to attempt this procedure.

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Appendix

Feedback on Components of Individual Performance

I. Fluency

General definition: does not refer to absolute speed of delivery, since native speakers of any language often show wide variations in this area. Fluency refers to overall smoothness, continuity, and naturalness of the student's speech, as opposed to pauses for rephrasing sentences, groping for words, and so forth.

Definition on each level of the scale:

1. Very many unnatural pauses, frequently halting and fragmentary delivery.
2. Quite a few unnatural pauses, frequently halting and fragmentary delivery.
3. Some unnatural pauses, occasionally halting and fragmentary delivery.
4. Hardly any unnatural pauses, fairly smooth and effortless delivery.
5. No unnatural pauses, almost effortless and smooth, but still perceptibly nonnative.
6. As effortless and smooth as speech of native speaker.

II. Comprehensibility

General definition: refers to the ability of the student to make himself understood-to convey meaning.

Definition on each level of the scale:

1. No comprehension -could not understand anything the student said.
2. Comprehended small bits and pieces, isolated words.
3. Comprehended some phrases or word clusters.
4. Comprehended short, simple sentences.
5. Comprehended most of what the student said.
6. Comprehended all of what the student said.

III. Amount of communication

General definition: refers to the quantity of information relevant to the communicative situation the student is able to convey.

Definition on each level of the scale:

1. Virtually no relevant information was conveyed by the student.
2. Very little relevant information was conveyed by the student.
3. Some relevant information was conveyed by the student.

4. A fair amount of relevant information was conveyed by the student.
5. Most relevant information was conveyed by the student.
6. All relevant information was conveyed by the student.

IV. Quality of communication

General definition: refers to the linguistic (grammatical) correctness of the student's statements.

Definition at each level of the scale:

1. No statements were structurally correct
2. Very few statements were structurally correct.
3. Some statements were structurally correct, but many structural problems remain.
4. Many correct statements, but some problems remain with structures.
5. Most statements were structurally correct; only minor problems with structure.
6. All statements were structurally correct.

(Lindner, 1977)

REVIEWS

The Writing Process: 20 Projects for Group Work.
Nancy Arapoff Cramer. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1985.
pp. 331.

The Writing Process contains a preface, twenty illustrated composition modules, and an appendix. The purpose of the text is to provide a composition workbook for high-intermediate ESL/EFL adult population. The author presents four instructional premises on which she feels the workbook should be based. The premises are: (1) students working at advanced levels of language require practice; (2) working in collaborative groups fosters the most dynamic environment for stimulating learning, with the instructor as facilitator; (3) the true product of composition evolves only after mastery of a complex set of processes; and (4) high level ESL/EFL students require little direct instruction in grammar. While the language of the workbook is geared towards the student, printed instructional aids are provided, for which the instructor may find use. There is no companion teacher's guide for the text.

Careful consideration of language teaching approaches and methods reveals that, in isolation, relatively few techniques present fresh ideas as to how the field can improve upon instruction. Consequently, most practitioners have adopted an eclectic approach to language instruction, in the belief that the discipline can be enhanced by compound strategizing in the foreign language classroom (Bowen et al. 1985). No aspect of second language (L2) performance is more apt to benefit from a harvest of approaches than is writing instruction. In L2 classrooms, advanced composition is practiced at a point when instrumentally motivated students have likely been replaced by integratively motivated students; as such, they are assumed prepared (cognitively and affectively) to accept the premise of serious composition. At this stage of acquisition, learners are expected to absorb yet another linguistic medium to be codified-one which, in truth, often represents an insurmountable task for many native writers. *The Writing Process* is then evaluated with special scrutiny given to the success with which its vernacular and content do not become myopic, strained, or inappropriate to the target population.

Over the last several decades (arguably since the invention of the term "rhetoric"), a great deal of homage has been paid to writing as a *process*-not as an ordered and linear regurgitation of ideas into

traditional formulas and then onto paper. In short, the process method of writing calls for a paradigm in which student invention and instructor intervention are carefully interwoven. Process rhetoric encourages such approaches as brainstorming, prewriting, thought incubation, collaborative revision, expository drafting, and an awareness of audience-as-purpose in composing. The term "process" itself implies rigor and repetition of effort.

The Writing Process represents a near restatement of the process method paradigm. In keeping with her premise that high-intermediate L2 students should assume primary responsibility for their own acquisition of writing skills, the author presents workbook modules in the form of distinct (topic supplied) projects to be attempted during a term of average length. She notes that these modules are interchangeable depending on class design and purpose. Each section follows a consistent format in order to provide graduated composition tasks for the L2 student: Getting Ideas, Putting Ideas Together, Drafting, Getting Feedback, Editing, and Follow-up. These sections are designed to both enlarge and compartmentalize specific writing topics. In this sense, groups which have as their purpose scientific writing can concentrate on modules that promote gathering research data and adopting an empirical tone. If creative writing is the stated goal of the class, the writing of short stories, poetry and plays can be encouraged. For each topic, the step-by-step approach offered in *The Writing Process* encourages sustained text production.

Of great importance to any writing instructor is the degree to which subject matter is "appropriate to the interests of the learners for whom the textbook is intended" (Daoud and Celce-Murcia 1979). One must also be concerned with the nature of vocabulary and syntax that students will discover in the text. Is the workbook reasonable for the entire class? Does the text allow for sequential acquisition of elements from simple to complex? And, perhaps centrally, does it describe and inform each "mode" of written discourse? These modes, or aims, of discourse have been described as either expressive, persuasive, referential, or literary (Kinneavy 1971). While some degree of overlap should be anticipated for each category, *The Writing Process* relies heavily on referential (scientific or informative) topics. Expressive or literary themes are virtually unrepresented, leading one to conclude that the author has passed on tasks which allow maturing L2 students to compose freely, pursuant to their self-concept as writers. Of the twenty

available modules, twelve involve empirical, research-based activities, while only two can be defined as expressive or literary.

An additional deficiency is the quality of module topics chosen for the target audience. Clearly, the textbook attempts to lead its nonnative audience into mainstream North American regimens. Whether these "pizza and tennis shoes" themes are appropriate or attend to matters of relevance in the students' lives will depend mainly on what types of learners populate a given L2 classroom and whether that classroom is located in an urban, suburban, or rural setting. This textbook implies an urban setting, wherein the target culture might recognize and routinely consider such issues as campus living, a new television series, and what to do should one suddenly find himself endowed with a sizeable fortune.

Adult L2 writing programs are most successful when (1) topic assignments match the students' own schemata, cultural background, and world experience (Petereson 1982), (2) topic assignments, such as project approaches to business and social understanding, are adapted to the student's age, surroundings, and aspirations (Boyd and Kenefick 1988), and, (3) students are given the opportunity to provide some situational input on writing projects. Is it thus inadvisable to pre-select themes for students to write about? Assuming L2 classrooms will vary greatly in profile, the topics available in *The Writing Process* are valuable more so in terms of how the author encourages and allows development of abstract ideas than that of their relative interest value. The point-albeit not innovatively demonstrated in the sample topics supplied-is that producing communicative text is a complicated, but reliable process that can be mastered with practice and meaningful, culturally broad contexts for exploration in the classroom.

My final exception to the text concerns the concept of a workbook-based curriculum in general, and the roles of the writing instructor and grammar text in particular. If the instructor is indeed a facilitator, his or her role cannot be limited to follow-up or incidental intervention. I suggest that writing teachers must be intuitively active in a classroom where workbooks and peer interaction/review are utilized. The test of a competent, involved instructor is the extent to which students are motivated or inhibited by such presence.

I recommend *The Writing Process* as a supplementary textbook to an advanced composition program for nonnative language writing students. Text organization is exceptional, inasmuch as the format allows for an optimal amount of writing activities both in and

outside of classroom settings. Task parameters, vocabulary, and excersises are appropriate for students who are motivated to write purposefully in the English language. At the same time, there exists a noted imbalance as to the types of writing required; I recommend students at this level be given the opportunity to volunteer project topics, and that such topics align evenly with their experience and eventual aspirations.

The Writing Process succeeds in promoting and ably demonstrating sensible, practical use of the process method of writing. I believe that the text will make its strongest contribution alongside a text(s) which offers a more rounded linguistic syllabus. This combination might, in fact, prove a desirable hedge against the needs personified by those who learn English as a second language and, in doing so, put a pencil to paper.

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